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DE RUEHSG #0933/01 2941552
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3827
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION PRIORITY 3567
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 2125
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 0467
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1078
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1803
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ OCT 5969
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 5734
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO PRIORITY 4065
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1939
RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFSS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SANTIAGO 000933

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PREL CI BL
SUBJECT: BACHELET'S UNASUR PARLIAMENT PLANS DRAW FIRE FROM CONGRESS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Several Chilean parliamentarians have criticized President Bachelet's attendance at an UNASUR parliament event in Bolivia to be held Oct. 17. The Chilean legislators allege that Bachelet should have consulted with them before attending and should have invited them to join the delegation. Although on the surface the complaints are largely about procedure, sources at both the MFA and Senate believe that the underlying problem is a deep-seated distrust of Hugo Chavez and concern about the role that he will play in UNASUR. End Summary.

Chilean Parliamentarians Criticize Bachelet's Attendance at UNASUR Meeting

¶2. (SBU) Several Chilean parliamentarians have criticized President Bachelet's attendance at an UNASUR parliament event in Bolivia. The meeting, which is being held Oct. 17 in Cochabamba, is the inauguration of a special commission charged with developing the ground rules for an UNASUR parliament.

¶3. (SBU) Some members of Congress have vocally criticized the President for not consulting with them about the creation of the new regional parliament and for not inviting members of Congress to join her delegation. Many members insist that backing the parliamentary group should be a congressional, rather than an executive, decision. Moreover, they say that they were never invited to attend the event. Others, including Senator Jaime Gazmuri (PS), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Commission, backed the President's decision and planned to travel with her to Cochabamba.

¶4. (SBU) Press reports and members of Congress quoted in them have misstated the situation by referring to it as the inauguration of an UNASUR parliament. Senators Hernan Larraín (UDI) and Sergio Romero (RN) said that the supposed UNASUR parliament would not be valid because Chile and other countries have not yet ratified the UNASUR treaty. The Senate Foreign Relations Commission called for the Cochabamba meeting to be delayed until a sufficient number of countries have ratified the UNASUR treaty. Senator Juan Pablo Letelier (PS), called the government's handling of the invitation "sloppy".

Outcry Motivated More By Politics than by Procedure

¶15. (SBU) The vehemence of the congressional reaction has taken many observers by surprise. Julio Camara, Secretary (Chief Staffmember) of the Senate Foreign Relations Commission, joked with Poloff Oct. 17 that he "didn't understand the scandal either." Camara confirmed what Patricio Pradel, a top MFA official working on UNASUR, told Poloff Oct. 16: Invitations to the event were sent directly to Chilean parliamentarians by Bolivian Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, and not by the presidential palace or the MFA.

¶16. (SBU) Opposition Chilean parliamentarians seem to have seized on the technicalities of the invitation and Bachelet's trip to register their discomfort with UNASUR and the president. Camara and Pradel both stated that many members of Congress see Chavez as controlling UNASUR and fear that high-level representation at this meeting would only continue to strengthen his hand and the organization. In fact, critics fear for UNASUR's autonomy, are concerned that an UNASUR parliament would only be another failed attempt at a regional legislature, and find the location of the meeting in Bolivia to be particularly politically inconvenient.

¶17. (SBU) Pradel defended Bachelet's decision to attend the meeting saying that, as President Pro Tempore of UNASUR, the Chilean president should support the organization's initiatives. He added that high level delegations--including legislators--from nearly every other UNASUR nation would be attending. Nonetheless, the president reportedly changed her plans from an overnight trip with a larger delegation to a two hour stay with a smaller group and no press. Foreign Minister Alejandro Foxley is no longer attending the meeting.

Instead, the Chilean delegation will include Senator Jaime Gazmuri (PS); Diputado Jorge Burgos (DC); Diputado Abel Jarpa (PRSD); Diputado Antonio Leal (PPD); Angel Flisfisch, MFA Planning Director and UNASUR Secretary Pro Tempore; Juan Gabriel Valdes, former Foreign Minister and current Chilean envoy assisting with the Bolivian crisis; and Roberto Ibarra, the Chilean consul in La Paz.

¶18. (SBU) As for the decision to locate the parliament in Cochabamba, Pradel said that this was actually a suggestion made several years ago by Brazilian President Lula da Silva which has since been strongly supported by Bolivia.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT: In this polarized country, congressional leaders have firm opinions about Bolivia's controversial president, and Bachelet's efforts to buck up Morales' administration with a show of international support have angered many in Congress. While it is impossible to know what happened to the missing invitations that the Bolivian VP was supposed to have sent to Chilean legislators, what is clear is that Bachelet reached out to her Concertacion backers in Congress to support this trip, leaving the opposition to grumble. END COMMENT.

SIMONS